CREATOR

VOLUME 19 NUMBER 4

REFLECTIONS IN A SWAMP TOO

And His mercy is upon generation after generation toward those who fear Him.
Luke 1:50

Swamp Journal of Hans Seismo[1]

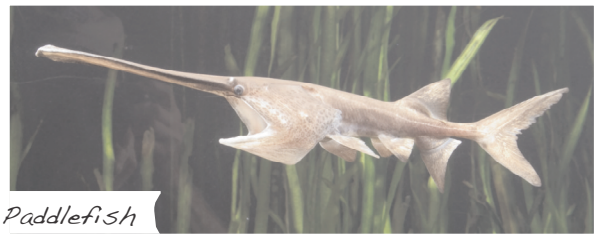
DAY 8: Those who read these humble notes – oh, how I wish you could join me here and experience the marvels that our Lord Jesus has embroidered into this incredible ecosystem. I want to encourage you to better understand the unbounded wisdom of God revealed by all ecosystems, and be led by godly fear into a deeper awe and worship of Him. I have experienced the fear of God while exploring a flower-filled meadow, but much more now it seems in this sometimes dark and threatening swamp. As I continue to encounter the dangers my Creator has sewn into the swamp, along with all of its other wonders, I'm getting a firmer grasp on the priceless treasure of what it means to truly tremble before our living Lord. This fear I am experiencing now is not the fear of punishment, but the fear of the One who is by nature terrifying! And strangely, it is driving me into a deeper love for Him.

DAY 9: I feel a little like David who had a feast spread before him by God, while danger surrounded him on all sides (Psalm 23). My Lord Jesus has filled the air this evening with the strange and beautiful music of countless frogs. The "dinner" He sets before me (Luke 12:37) includes a beautiful "tablecloth" of duckweed covering much of the swamp's surface, the "window dressing" of Spanish moss everywhere adorning branches, the "centerpiece" of the cypress tree, the "garnish" of shrubs and flowers, and the "beverage" of tea-colored water. But the main course – the "meat" of my swamp banquet – is the increasing joy I experience as I grow in the fear of the Lord and the peace it brings me (Psalm 2:11; Isaiah 33:6).

Cache River Swamp at sunset

DAY 10: Swamps are so hauntingly beautiful in the evening, and in the early morning when everything is shrouded in mist. As I discovered last week — the fear of God and the beauty of our Lord go hand in hand. The swamp also radiates the "love and life and activity" of the Trinity.[2] Along with countless invertebrates, many species of fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals call the swamp their home, at least for part of the year.

Some of the fish I've identified can be found in many other ecosystems — catfish, sunfish, and minnows to name a few. Other fish seem more properly designed by God for this swamp environment — gar, paddlefish, bowfin,



Paddlefish

and the mosquitofish. The alien-looking sturgeon also thrives here.

Of all the vertebrates I have encountered, however, the most abundant certainly are the amphibians — especially frogs and salamanders. Although salamanders are mute, the frogs are anything but quiet. They are the "temple worshipers" of the swamp — singing strange, sweet "hymns," especially late in the evening. Sometimes I have great difficulty distinguishing the songs of each species because their choruses are so deafening. Ah, but Jesus has composed such a

Green treefrog

beautiful array of alien music through these creatures. He is so wonderful!

Reptiles are also well represented throughout the throb of life within the swamp. Numerous species of snakes and turtles reside year round in this wetland. And it seems to be a great place for them to live! I was stunned to read that the alligator snapping turtle can reach 500 pounds (225 kg). There must be plenty for it to eat in the swamp. But, without question, the king of the reptiles in southern deepwater swamps is the alligator, another keystone species. As little as one hundred years ago, alligators 19 feet (six meters) in length were found here. I can't imagine anyone coming into this swamp without feeling some sense of uneasiness.

If treated with a measure of reverence, alligators rarely attack folks in swamps. Food is abundant and they don't need to eat people. (I've heard, however, that it's best to stay clear of an alligator when it's guarding its babies!) Their main source of energy is fish, turtles, and small mammals. And in many ways, the health of deepwater swamps is dependent upon alligators. Christ reveals to us His awesome power and tender care as Creator through these reptiles. Apparently, raccoons and bobcats are

much less likely to raid bird nests when alligators are around. More than once over the past few days, I have been startled by the unnerving sound of an alligator's loud bellowing as it reverberates throughout the trees and bushes – a clear warning to any would-be thieves. These reptile vocalizations really add to the terrifying feeling of the swamp, especially if they're heard late at night.

DAY 11: The more I explore, the more I realize that our Lord Jesus has "written laws" into the fabric of this swamp ecosystem, laws which I dare not ignore. These "commands" are not found on tablets of stone, but revealed in the behavior of His creatures. If I neglect (disobey) such cardinal rules as, "Do not handle the snakes," "Do not swim with the alligators," or "Do not eat plants with which you are unfamiliar," I risk my own health and safety, and I could pay with my life. Out of curiosity, I counted the number of times God warned His people in the book of Deuteronomy to be "careful" – no less than 26 times. In a similar way, I must exercise great care when I come in contact with the plants and animals of this environment.

DAY 12: Eighty percent of the 30 or so snake species living in deepwater swamps are harmless, but the twenty percent that possess venom can be quite dangerous. The deadliest is the Eastern diamondback rattlesnake, although the cottonmouth (water moccasin) comes in a close second. Earlier today, I was nearly bitten by a large cottonmouth. At that moment, I was certainly gripped with a holy dread of my Creator! How much more terrifying is the One who made the cottonmouth?

Cottonmouth (Agkistrodon piscivorus)

Above is a photo I took of a cottonmouth while exploring a swamp in southern Illinois with my precious wife. We gave it a wide berth! The other venomous reptiles include the coral snake, pigmy rattler, and canebrake (or timber) rattlesnake. Many folks have exaggerated the ominous nature of these snakes through their "tall swamp tales," nevertheless the potential these snakes have for harm certainly reenforces the clear message of the swamp – "Our Creator is to be feared!" It seems that even the non-venomous

Black rat snake (Elaphe obsolete)

snakes add to the menacing feel of this ecosystem because I've frequently seen them hanging from tree branches.

Many swamps around the world are way stations for hundreds of species of migrating birds. While most birds live

only part of the year in the swamp, it is an essential resting and refueling stop in their travels. (So important are swamps to the natural economy of God's creation, that careless destruction of some swamps in the U.S. has sadly led to the extinction of a few bird species.) Birds display the shared beauty of our triune God and the swamp is a wide-spreading stage for these special creatures. Some of the most spectacular of large birds – the great blue heron, great egret, white ibis, wood stork, and anhinga – live here. Despite their size, these huge birds possess amazing agility while flying, and many perform elaborate courtship dances. I guess they could be considered the "ballerinas" in this theater of God's glory.

I recall an encounter that my wife and I had a few years back with a great blue heron at the Cache River Swamp in southern Illinois. Late one summer evening, we observed with astonishment

Great blue heron

a large heron flying through the crowded trees. That such an enormous bird could maneuver so skillfully among the bald cypresses left us speechless. In keeping with the swamp's common theme of "fearing God," we also experienced the deep, haunting cries of the great blue herons echoing throughout the swamp, which, not unlike the sound of an alligator's bellowing, sent chills down our spines.

My research has also revealed that more than 30 species of mammals roam deep-water swamps: these include cougar, bob-cat, black bear, red and gray fox, beaver, opossum, raccoon, white-tailed deer, squirrel, skunk, and shrew. The spookiest swamp mammals have to be the bats. Yet they are relatively harmless – sleeping during the day and emerging from their hiding places in the evening to feast upon the plentiful supply of flying insects that populate the atmosphere just above the water. And a good thing too . . .

I've read stories of early explorers dying from shock after being over-whelmed by clouds of innumerable mosquitoes, though I think this has been a rare event. Throughout history, the biggest problem with mosquitoes is their ability to transmit malaria. The term malaria comes from the Italian words *mala aria* – meaning "bad air." It was once thought that harmful vapors emanating from swamp water was what caused this disease or "swamp fever" as it is sometimes called. We now know that malaria is caused by a tiny parasite transmitted by mosquitoes.[3] This debilitating and sometimes deadly malady is a very real hazard in many swamps around the world, especially those located in tropical regions. Up until 1950, malaria was present in the southern U.S. Before this time, it had spread across most of the nation (1880s). So serious was the problem,

that several U.S. Presidents contracted malaria during their lifetime — Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, James Monroe, Andrew Jackson, James Garfield and Ulysses S. Grant. Theodore Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy also contracted malaria while serving out of country.

As a general rule, the less a swamp is disturbed by foresting activities and road construction, the fewer the mosquitoes. Our Lord Jesus demonstrates His sweet kindness by providing swamps with abundant dragonflies, birds, and bats to keep mosquito populations in check. In addition, He created a tiny fish — the

Mosquitofish

mosquitofish (*Gambusia affinis*) — that loves to gorge itself on mosquito larvae found near the surface of the water.

Insects teach us to fear our Creator, but that is not all. God also uses insects to proclaim the beautiful complexity of order He has built into the swamp, something I've already seen in the incredible chemistry of swamp water. For example, our Lord Jesus has paired many species of moths and butterflies with a very limited number of plant species. These butterflies and moths lay their eggs on these plants and no others, and gather nectar from their blossoms. In the process, they help pollinate the flowers.

Examples of insects & the plants on which they lay their eggs:

- cypress sphinx moth → cypress trees
- Promethea moth → sweet gum or spicebush
- zebra swallowtail → the pawpaw plant
- great purple hairstreak → mistletoe
- Hessel's hairstreak → Atlantic white cedar
- red admiral → false nettle

Zebra swallowtail laying eggs on pawpaw

I'm so fascinated by all this! I find myself evermore drawn to examine the plants and animals of the swamp while maintaining a respectful attitude toward them and especially their Creator.

DAY 13: Some folks want to convince us that we need not fear God. But the Bible teaches quite the opposite. God invites us into His care and comfort only after we have come to truly fear Him with a holy dread (Exodus 20:20; Judges 6:22-23; Isaiah 8:13-14; Luke 2:8-11; 5:8-11; Revelation 1:17). In effect, He bids us to "Fear not!" only after we have come to "Fear Him!" (Matthew 10:28-31; Luke 12:5,7,32). Though the terror of personal punishment cannot be found in Heaven, the fear of God never dies. Let me give you an analogy: It is well known that baby alligators find safety in the mouth of their parents, but that mouth remains potentially quite dangerous. The bite that an

alligator can produce is upwards of 2,000 pounds, or one ton, per square inch (140 kg per square centimeter), which is almost four times that of a lion. In a much greater way, the Christian is perfectly and eternally safe in Christ, yet the wrath of the Lamb will continue to punish the wicked in Hell forever (Revelation 6:15-17). It is at the Cross, and nowhere else, that a fear of eternal punishment is relieved.

Princeton theologian J. Gresham Machen said it best: "[Jesus] died not to abolish but to satisfy divine justice. . . . Even the Christian must fear God. . . . It is a fear rather of what might have been than what is; it is a fear of what would come were we not in Christ. Without such fear there can be no true love; for love of the Saviour is proportioned to one's horror of that from which man has been saved. And how strong are the lives that are suffused with such a love!" [4] Amen.

Other people try to boil down the fear of God to a high level of respect and nothing else. Fearing God does involve this, yet is much more. Hebrews 12:29 reminds us that God is also the God of Mt. Sinai – "a Consuming Fire!" I so appreciate how one well-known pastor puts it: "Certainly the fear of God includes awe and reverence, but it does not exclude literal holy terror." [5] And I recall what Pastor Albert Martin once said, in a slightly different way: "There is a legitimate sense in which the fear of God involves being afraid of God, being gripped with terror and with dread" [6] The early Church certainly experienced such holy terror when she watched two of her own – Ananias and Sapphira – perish after lying to God (Acts 5:1-11).

DAY 14: There are times when people are called to fear God because of their sins and impending judgment (Proverbs 3:7; Amos 3:8; Malachi 3:5; Matthew 10:28), but in eternity, the perfect love of God (1 John 4:18), and the perfected fear of God this love will create, will drive out all fear of judgment in God's people. Yet, they, like the holy angels, will continue to fear the Lord in Heaven forever: "A God greatly feared in the council of the holy ones, and awesome above all those who are around Him" (Psalm 89:7). And this fear will be joined by great joy (Psalm 2:11). I am convinced that we will grow in a fear of God forever because He will be seen – in ever-increasing measure – as the holy and majestic I AM (Exodus 3:14). Simply put: He is fearful because He is. I am also convinced that we cannot fear God too much if we continue to grow in our love for Him through Jesus Christ!

Indeed, tranquility and terror touch in the swamp. In a way, the alligator provides us with a picture of our God, albeit a very imperfect one (Psalm 103:11,17; Luke 1:50). The Almighty is holy and, as such, incompatible with the sins of mankind. We are like a person – marred by sin – floating in the slow-moving river of life, and there's a very large mother alligator downstream aggressively protecting her nest. We can try to swim upstream and away from her, but eventually we tire and are drawn inexorably by the current ever closer to a confrontation. The alligator is inescapable. Likewise, sooner or later we must face a terrifying God; it is inevitable (please read 2 Corinthians 5:10-11 in the KJV).

A thought just now came to me: "How could anyone avoid being eaten if they were in the water with an alligator? We are no match for the speed and strength of this reptile, and we certainly can't kill it with our bare hands. Is there any possibility of making peace with it?" Then it dawned on me: we would be safe if we could somehow transform ourselves into one of the alligator's offspring. That sounds crazy, I know, but what if it were possible? That certainly would be the one way we could be secure in the presence of a fiercely-protective mother.

Alligator guarding its eggs

If someone could become a baby alligator, then they could hide in the adult's mouth because that is how alligators guard their young. It is the one safe place in the river. Isn't this — and I write this with the greatest reverence for my holy Lord — much like it is for a child of God to be protected from His inescapable wrath? Pastor John Gill writes, "They that fear the Lord are in the utmost safety . . . they have no reason to be afraid of anything." 7

The only way for Esther to save herself and her people was to boldly approach the very one who was the most dangerous person in the kingdom (Esther 4:16-5:2). This is exactly opposite of what Jonah did when he feared God's command (Jonah 1:1-9). Jonah's fear was slavish — it made him flee; Esther's terror was godly — it moved her in love to draw close with fear and trembling. And she was saved by the mouth/commands of her husband, who was her king (Esther 8:8). God also used the mouth of a great sea creature to teach Jonah to fear Him rightly. Should it seem strange, then, that God might use an alligator to illustrate what it means to fear Him through a baby alligator's need to seek safety in the mouth of this most terrifying creature (Proverbs 14:26)? It is by its mouth that an alligator destroys its enemies, and it is also by its mouth that it provides a sanctuary for its helpless young. So too, it is by the mouth of our Lord Jesus that God will destroy His enemies (Revelation 19:15), and by the Word of His mouth that we shall be saved and live forevermore (John 5:24)! Godly fear causes us to "swim" to Christ, not away from Him (Psalm 5:7; 73:25), and to be confident that we are safe in Him alone.

And it's no more possible for us to become a child of God then it is for us to become a baby alligator. . . . God alone must do the miraculous and transform us into one of His own. Yet, if we become one of His children, we are then perfectly safe in His care, not unlike the safety a baby alligator finds in the mouth of its parent. If anyone wants to escape Christ's wrath against sinful mankind (Revelation 6:15-17), then

they must become a child of God and seek shelter in the very One who is the most dangerous (Nahum 1:2-8)! And this is exactly what Isaiah 8 teaches. If we humbly fear God and seek shelter in Him, then He becomes our Safe Haven: "It is the Lord of hosts whom you should regard as holy. And He shall be your fear, and He shall be your dread. Then He shall become a Sanctuary" (Isaiah 8:13,14). John Calvin, commenting on this passage, remarks, "every person who . . . undertakes to fear Him alone . . . will find that no haven is more safe than His protection . . . [and he] will enjoy tranquility of mind." It is in Christ that terror and peace kiss!

On DAY 2 of my journal, I wrote, "I'm tempted to conclude that the greatest peace we can experience here on Earth is found where the greatest fear of God is on display." I have since considered this statement in greater depth and have asked myself: "When in history has mankind seen the greatest display of the terror of God? During the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.? In the years 1348 - 1350 when 40 million people in Europe died of the bubonic plague? During World War II?" Though all these events were horrifying, the greatest display of the terror of God occurred upon the Cross of Christ! And it is here that the greatest offer of the peace of God is made.

In the end, my two weeks in the swamp have taught me that our Creator is terrifying. And that this terror is inseparable from the peace that surrounds Him, and the beauty and joy He possesses in infinite amount — all leading us into true love and worship.

It is fascinating to me that all four of these elements — fear, peace, beauty (glory), and joy — were encountered by the shepherds in Luke 2 as they heard from the angel the glorious news that Christ had come to Earth. We will never experience anyone more frightening and comforting, more glorious or more joy-evoking than Jesus!

O taste and see that the LORD is good; How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him! O fear the LORD, you His saints; For to those who fear Him there is no want (Ps. 34:8-9).

1 Professor Seismo is a fictitious character.
2 Read more about the "mutual love and life and activity" of the Trinity in **CREATOR** Volume 19 Number 2.
3 The parasite is Plasmodium falciparum and the mosquito that transmits it is Anopheles sp.
4 J. Gresham Machen, "The Fear of God"
5 John MacArthur, "Harry Emerson Fosdick and the Emerging Theology of Early Liberalism"
6 Albert Martin, "The Fear of God Part II"
7 John Gill, "Of the Fear of God"

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